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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000120

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER PHUM PGOV CE LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA TRUCE MONITORING MISSION TEMPORARILY  
SUSPENDS OPERATIONS IN TRINCOMALEE FOLLOWING RECENT VIOLENCE

REF: COLOMBO 0055

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Summary: On January 17 the Nordic-sponsored Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) announced the temporary suspension of operational activities in the eastern district of Trincomalee following an apparent Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attack on a Sri Lanka Navy bus. Although no military personnel died in the attack, two civilians were killed in the "crossfire," according to the military spokesman--an account disputed by Tamil eyewitnesses. The SLMM, which is criticized by some Sinhalese nationalists for pro-LTTE bias, on January 13 issued an uncharacteristically strong public statement on recent LTTE attacks against the Sri Lankan military that warned that, absent positive steps from both parties, a resumption of hostilities seems imminent. We are continuing to monitor the security situation in Trincomalee and elsewhere and have convened a meeting of the Emergency Action Committee on January 19 to review the situation. End summary.

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TURMOIL IN TRINCOMALEE  
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2. (SBU) At mid-morning on January 17 a remote-detonated device exploded near a bus carrying Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) personnel on a well-traveled road in the eastern district of Trincomalee, about 7 km from USAID's Office of Transition Initiative (OTI) office. Eight sailors were injured in the blast. Arthur Tveiten, the head of the Nordic-sponsored Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) in Trincomalee, told poloff that following the blast members of the security forces converged on the area, and SLMM monitors heard sporadic gunfire for about 30-40 minutes. When the gunfire stopped, two Tamil civilians (both reportedly shot in the head) were dead, several others injured, and more than 50 had been rounded up for questioning. Military spokesman Brigadier General Atula Jayawardena told POL FSN the following morning that the two civilians had been killed in the "cross fire" when a group of suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cadres opened fire on security forces after the blast.

3. (C) In his conversation with poloff, however, Tveiten disputed the spokesman's account. Tveiten asserted that SLMM had received no reports of "crossfire" and asserted that it would have been extremely difficult for armed LTTE cadres to infiltrate that particular stretch of road, which he described as typically heavily patrolled by the security forces, unobserved. (That said, the LTTE apparently did manage to plant the mine that hit the Navy bus unobserved.) We have no reports of any members of the security forces--including the sailors who stumbled off the bus in the immediate aftermath of the blast and could have provided prime fodder for LTTE marksmen--being injured in the crossfire.

4. (C) A Sri Lankan Catholic priest who was at his NGO jobsite about 50 meters away at the time of the blast, told poloff that he heard gunfire after the detonation and asserted that Sri Lanka Army (SLA) soldiers on the scene were spraying bullets everywhere. He later acknowledged, however, that he kept his head down during the gunfire and did not actually see anyone shooting. Poloff also spoke by telephone with a Tamil restaurant owner who had been injured in the post-blast gunfire. According to this source, the soldiers normally stationed on the road began firing wildly after the blast occurred. The restaurant owner said he sought refuge inside his business and was hit in the arm by a bullet. He confirmed that the shooting went on for about 30 minutes, during which time he observed eight motorbikes carrying two masked SLA soldiers each. POL FSN spoke with another local business owner, who said SLA soldiers entered his shop after the blast, damaging some of the inventory and stealing cell phones, phone cards and the equivalent of USD 200 in local currency.

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SLMM SUSPENDS TRINCO OPERATIONS  
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15. (SBU) Citing "the recent escalation of violence in Trincomalee," on the evening of January 17 the SLMM announced the temporary suspension of operational activities in Trincomalee. In a conversation with poloff the following day, Tveiten said that the SLMM action was not taken in response to a particular threat but rather because of general concerns about safety risks in the increasingly volatile environment. He added that the particular road on which the explosion took place is one that SLMM typically travels several times a day--sometimes accompanied by the military--and that two SLMM monitors happened to be only a few hundred meters away from the site when the blast occurred.

16. (SBU) Trincomalee has seen near-continuous hartals, or general shutdowns, since the January 2 killings of five Tamil students (reftel). Schools opened January 16 for the first time since the beginning of the month after police, the Tamil People's Forum and the SLMM negotiated an end to the hartals. The back-to-back shutdowns (some of which were called by an LTTE-backed Tamil organization and some of which were called by Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) fronts) pose an obvious and severe economic strain on all residents, regardless of ethnicity, and are widely resented. (When the JVP MP for Trincomalee turned up in town to see how the JVP-sponsored shutdown Jan. 12-14 was being observed, his vehicle was attacked by angry Sinhalese, and he was forced to beat a hasty retreat.) Local OTI staff reported a virtual run on the pawn shops--a generally reliable indicator of economic stress--when banks and businesses were allowed to open for a half day last week.

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BLUNT WORDS FROM THE MONITORS  
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17. (U) The SLMM action follows an uncharacteristically stern public statement from the monitors on January 13 condemning a January 12 attack on an SLN vehicle that killed 10 sailors in Vavuniya and describing as "unacceptable" repeated LTTE claims that "'the People'" are behind the attacks on the military." The statement went on to fault the security forces for harassing the civilian population and implicitly blamed the Government for allowing "alternative armed elements" to operate in Government-controlled areas and destabilize the ceasefire. Calling on both parties to remedy the situation "instead of merely blaming each other and pointing fingers," the statement emphasized the need for evidence of "more commitment from the two Parties if war is not to break out in Sri Lanka." Within hours of the statement being issued, on the night of January 13 an explosive device detonated under a parked vehicle in the SLMM compound in the eastern district of Batticaloa, damaging several vehicles. No SLMM personnel were present on the compound at the time of the blast, and the security guard on duty (who was reportedly asleep at the time of the incident) was not injured. No one has claimed responsibility for this attack.

18. (C) SLMM head Hagrup Haukland met with the LTTE in Kilinochchi on January 16. Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar told the Ambassador the following day that Haukland "went pretty far," telling the LTTE that the SLMM cannot operate in a situation of armed conflict and threats. Brattskar said Haukland essentially accused the LTTE of lying when it denied responsibility for recent attacks on the security forces and other violence.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The SLMM suspension may have been just as much a political decision--to send a wake-up call to the parties that the current environment is unacceptable--as a security decision. The Emergency Action Committee will meet on January 19 to assess the situation. We continue to monitor the safety of OTI staff and the small American community in the area (and in other parts of the north and east) closely.

110. (C) Comment (cont.): The pressure on security forces in the north and east has been unrelenting since the presidential election in mid-November, and if our sources' accounts of events are accurate, the good order and discipline generally shown by the security forces thus far may be beginning to fray. The security forces' reaction to the blast as reported to us, unfortunately, plays right into LTTE hands and does little to improve the Government's image within an already suspicious and fearful Tamil community. We will use the opportunity presented by upcoming high-level meetings with Sri Lankan officials to stress the need for continued restraint, despite the constant provocations.

